

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Methods for Social Research
Spring 2015
Updated 1/28

Instructor: Van C. Tran
Office: 606 Knox Hall
Phone: 212-854-4115
E-mail: vantran@columbia.edu
Course time: Mondays & Wednesdays, 2:40-3:55 p.m.
Location: Kent Hall 413
Office hours: Wednesdays, 4:15-6:15 p.m. Please sign up [here](#).
Website: https://courseworks.columbia.edu/portal/site/SOCIW3010_001_2015_1
Teaching assistants: Mr. Jonathan Lin, jl4169@columbia.edu, Mondays, 12-1 p.m.
Mr. Adam Obeng, ago2114@columbia.edu, Tuesdays, 2-3 p.m.
Note: There will be no discussion sections. We will cover these materials during lectures.

Course Description:

This course is intended to help you develop an understanding of and an ability to conduct social science research. We pursue these goals through examination of research monographs and articles selected as representative of different styles of social science analyses as well as through four assignments in which you will apply various methods to an actual research project. The methods we will use include ethnography, in-depth interviewing, systematic social observation, census data, and survey research. We will also cover experiments, content analysis, and demographic methods. While the majority of our readings and examples will come from sociology we will also use examples from economics, political science, and psychology. This is a required course for all students majoring in sociology.

The discipline of sociology at its core is both a systematic and a creative endeavor. This course gives each of you the opportunity to exercise your sociological imagination and to ask and competently answer questions that you might find intriguing about the social world around us. You will not become an expert in any particular research method in this course; we will leave that to more advanced courses in research methodology that you can choose based on your own needs and interests. You will, however, gain a general understanding of the key methods that sociologists (and social scientists) use. This will give you a good starting point for a larger research project of your own such as your senior thesis.

The skills you will learn in this class will also be very useful to you in a variety of situations. This class will teach you to read and analyze research findings, to critically evaluate claims of truth about the social world, and to think and write logically and clearly. These are lifelong skills that will serve you well in a variety of workplace and academic settings. The course readings will cover a range of interesting substantive topics including urban poverty, immigration and assimilation, diversity and inequality, race relations, public opinions, and health and medicine.

The course welcomes students from diverse backgrounds, including sociology, urban studies, political science, economics, psychology, social anthropology, and history. The prerequisite to the course is *The Social World* or you may also register with the permission of the instructor.

Course Objectives:

In this course on research methods, we will:

1. Develop an intuitive understanding of models and methods within the field of sociology.
2. Become familiar with a variety of *qualitative* and *quantitative* methodological approaches.
3. Explore methodological concepts and develop analytical skills for conducting research.
4. Gain hands-on experience doing some empirical research by working on a group project.

Course Requirements:

1. Lecture and section participation (20% of final grade)
2. Four short papers (15% each of final grade)
3. Take-home final exam (20% of final grade)

Lecture and Section Participation

Your active participation in class and in sections is strongly encouraged. Please complete assigned readings before each class and come prepared to discuss them. Everyone should join in, even those who are naturally shy. There will also be time to discuss your research visits and to share experiences from these trips with the class in the **discussion sections**. These discussions will allow you to connect your experiences on the ground with the issues in the course readings.

Class Project: The Social Life of Broadway

As part of the course, you will participate in a group research project, called the **Social Life of Broadway**, designed to give you actual experience on how sociologists conduct their research. The main idea is to study in-depth the entire length of Broadway, starting from the Financial District in Lower Manhattan and ending in Inwood in Upper Manhattan. More details about this group project will be discussed and distributed in class, but you will be expected to make at least **four visits** to a neighborhood segment along Broadway and to become familiarized with it during the semester. For your assignments, you will be collecting original data through participant observations, qualitative interviews, systematic neighborhood observations, and surveys. This will require both collective creativity from all of you, but you will be able to engage with the city and its diverse neighborhoods in a very substantive way. You can visit these neighborhoods at your leisure, but you will be responsible for completing the research assignments by the deadlines indicated. Detailed information will be provided at every stage of the process.

Four Short Papers

More details about each of these three assignments will be distributed in class. You will be expected to do some original research and to write approximately 5-6 pages per assignment.

1. Neighborhood memo of your assigned neighborhood segment, **due February 16**
2. Interview paper with business owners about their experiences, **due March 9**
3. Research paper based on census data and systematic social observations, **due March 30**
4. Research paper based on in-person survey of local businesses, **due April 20**

Take-home final exam (due on Monday, May 11 at 5 p.m.)

The final exam will cover materials from the entire course. It will be distributed in class on May 4 and will be due on Monday, May 11 at 5 p.m. There will be three essay questions requiring a synthesis of the course readings, lectures, research assignments and in-class discussions.

Course Policies:

1. Doing the reading is essential to your comprehension and participation in class. Some questions to ponder for each reading assignment include: What data and methodology is employed by the author? What is the main argument or thesis? What claims are being made by the author? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the author's argument? Do you agree or disagree with the author? If so, why? How does the reading relate to the lecture materials? How does it relate to current events or public opinion? Thinking about and answering these questions will help prepare you for section discussions and written assignments.
2. Please complete assigned readings before each class and come prepared to discuss them. Everyone should join in, even those who are naturally shy. The quality of your comments is more important than the quantity. Your active participation in class is strongly encouraged. I will set aside some time during my lectures for discussion, so you can raise any questions that you might have then. If you don't understand something, it is often the case that some of your classmates might also have the same questions, but they might be too shy to ask them. By raising questions about the reading materials, you will help all of us to learn better.
3. I am happy to meet with you individually during my office hours to answer questions on any aspects of the course. I also would like to get to know you, to learn more about your interests, and to see how I can help you. I would encourage you to sign up for a 15-minute appointment with me early on in the semester. Before major assignment deadlines, I will make an effort to provide extra office hours, but it is always best to plan ahead if you anticipate needing any help. I often try to stay a few minutes after lectures, so if you have "small" questions, then this will be an excellent time to approach me. I would like you to perform as well as you can in my course, so please do not hesitate to ask questions and to get feedback on your work. Your teaching assistants could also be a great resource, so I would encourage you to approach them as well.
4. Paper assignments are due on **Mondays at 5 p.m.** Please submit one electronic copy (in Microsoft Word) via CourseWorks and two paper copies in person. You may submit them in class, to your teaching assistants, or to my mailbox in 501 Knox Hall in the Department of Sociology. Recognizing that we all have busy lives and balance multiple commitments, you will be allowed one **48-hour no-question-asked extension** on one of your papers (but not on the final exam). Beyond this allowance, late assignments will receive a lower grade. **No further extensions will be granted**, except in the case of serious illness. If you are ill, you should go to see your physician and provide a note to support any extension request.
5. Technology in the classroom can be both a blessing and a real distraction. If you would like to use your laptop during class, I would recommend that you turn off your internet browsers and email clients. **Laptops should be used for note-taking purposes only** and we will rely on the honor code for the reinforcement of this rule. Please help me and your classmates in our effort to create a classroom environment that is truly conducive to learning and sharing.

Course Materials:

Books to purchase

Available at Book Culture at 536 W. 112th St. and on reserve at Lehman Social Sciences Library

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kasinitz, Philip, John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters and Jennifer Holdaway. 2008. *Inheriting the City*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Logan, John. 2014. *Diversity and Disparities: America Enters a New Century*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. (This is available in PDF via the course website).

Marsden, Peter V. 2012. *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mullainathan, Sendhil and Eldar Shafir. 2013. *Scarcity: The New Science of Having Less and How It Defines Our Lives*. New York, NY: Picador. Introduction & Chapters 1-7.

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Waters, Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Articles

All other readings (articles and chapters) will be made available via the course website in PDF.

COURSE SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1: Social Science Research

Wednesday, January 21

Ragin, Charles C. and Lisa M. Amoroso. 2011. *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*, 2nd Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. Chapter 1.

Week 2: Theory, Methods, and Data

Monday, January 26

Wednesday, January 28

Ragin, Charles C. and Lisa M. Amoroso. 2011. *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*, 2nd Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. Chapters 2&3.

Discussion Section 1: Introductions & New York City Neighborhoods

Week 3: Ethnography, Part 1

Monday, February 2

Wednesday, February 4

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Parts I, II & III.

Week 4: Ethnography, Part 2

Monday, February 9

Wednesday, February 11

Duneier, Mitchell. 1999. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Appendix.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapters 1-3, pp. 1-65.

Discussion Section 2: Q&A for Assignment #1 & Neighborhood Assignment

Week 5: Interviews, Part 1

Monday, February 16

Wednesday, February 18

First paper due on Monday, February 16

Waters, Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5.

Week 6: Interviews, Part 2

Monday, February 23

Wednesday, February 25

Waters, Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Appendix.

Weiss, Robert S. 1995. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press. Chapters 1-4, pp. 1-119.

Discussion Section 3: Q&A for Assignment #2 & Discussion of Assignment #1

Week 7: Demography, Part 1

Monday, March 2

Wednesday, March 4

Logan, John. 2014. *Diversity and Disparities: America Enters a New Century*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Chapters 1, 2, & 3.

Week 8: Demography, Part 2

Monday, March 9

Wednesday, March 11

Second paper due on Monday, March 9

Logan, John. 2014. *Diversity and Disparities: America Enters a New Century*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation. Chapters 10, 11, & 12.

Discussion Section 4: Q&A for Assignment #3 and Discussion of Assignment #2

Spring Recess: Happy Spring Break!

Week 9: Surveys, Part 1: Introduction

Monday, March 23

Wednesday, March 25

Schuman, Howard. 2002. "Sense and Nonsense about Surveys." *Contexts* 1(2): 40-47.

Singleton, Royce A. Jr. and Bruce C. Straits. 2010. *Approaches to Social Research*, 5th ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 4.

Marsden, Peter V. 2012. *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapter 1 and Appendix.

Week 10: Surveys, Part 2: Sampling and Measurement

Monday, March 30

Wednesday, April 1

Third paper due on Monday, March 30

Singleton, Royce A. Jr. and Bruce C. Straits. 2010. *Approaches to Social Research*, 5th ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. Chapters 5 & 6.

Marsden, Peter V. 2012. *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapters 3 & 4.

Discussion Section 5: Q&A for Assignment #4 & Discussion of Assignment #3

Week 11: Surveys, Part 3: Survey Design and Instruments

Monday, April 6

Wednesday, April 8

Singleton, Royce A. Jr. and Bruce C. Straits. 2010. *Approaches to Social Research*, 5th ed. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. Chapters 9 & 10.

Marsden, Peter V. 2012. *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Chapters 8 & 12.

Week 12: Experiments

Monday, April 13

Wednesday, April 15

Mullainathan, Sendhil and Eldar Shafir. 2013. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York, NY: Picador. Introduction & Chapters 1-7.

LaCour, Michael J. and Donald P. Green. 2014. "When Contact Changes Minds: An Experiment on Transmission of Support for Gay Equality." *Science* 346(6215): 1366-1369.

Discussion Section 6: Q&A for Assignment #4 and Discussion of Assignment #3

Week 13: Content Analysis

Monday, April 20

Wednesday, April 22

Fourth paper due on Monday, April 20

Nelson, Alondra. 2011. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Chapters 1-4.

Week 14: Mixed Methods

Monday, April 27

Wednesday, April 29

Kasinitz, Philip, John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters and Jennifer Holdaway. 2008. *Inheriting the City*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Chapters 1-5 and Methodological Appendix.

Discussion Section 7: Discussion of Assignment #4 & Review Session for Final Exam

Week 15: Ethical Considerations

Monday, May 4

Take-home final exam will be given out in class and will be due on Monday, May 11, 2015.

Ragin, Charles C. and Lisa M. Amoroso. 2011. *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press. Chapter 4.

A final note on academic integrity and collaboration at Columbia:

The intellectual venture in which we are all engaged requires of faculty and students alike the highest level of personal and academic integrity. As members of an academic community, each one of us bears the responsibility to participate in scholarly discourse and research in a manner characterized by intellectual honesty and scholarly integrity.

In practical terms, this means that, as students, you must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your research papers and projects; you must be scrupulously honest when taking your examinations; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent. If you have any questions about what constitutes a primary

source to be cited, please come to see me during my office hours and we can talk in more details.
For further information, please see: <http://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/integrity>